DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 195 943 CS 005 755

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TITLE Independent Reading: A Teacher's Tale of Success in a Small, Traditional School.
PUB DATE Nov 80
NOTE 11p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Council of Teachers of English (70th, Cincinnati, OH, November 21-26, 1980).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Course Descriptions; Curriculum Development; Elective Courses; High Schools; *Independent Reading; *Independent Study; Junior High Schools; *Literature Appreciation; *Reading Interests; *Reading Programs; *Recreational Reading

ABSTRACT

Reasoning that in a basic English class there is barely enough time to read one or two novels a year, an English teacher convinced the principal of a Youngstown junior-senior high school that an independent reading course would be of tremendous value to those students who are avid readers as well as those who enjoy reading but can never seem to find the time. A book list and course objective of ten books in 18 weeks were then devised, and due to lack of funds for materials, the teacher began to collect individual copies of books from the list on her own. In the course, which proved to be very successful, students selected a book and filled in the title, author, and the date they began reading next to their names on a large chart. As they read, they kept a running list of difficult words they encountered, and on which they could later be tested. To keep track of the students' reading, the teacher reviewed index cards on which the students recorded one or two line summaries of their daily reading. When a student completed a book, the teacher assigned a tailor-made activity specifically related to what the student had read and his or her response. Students found that this approach taught them responsibility for their pace and assignments and independence in researching their own ideas. (HTH)

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Independent Reading:

A Teacher's Tale of Success in a Small, Traditional School

> Independent reading is one of my favorite classes. It is well-organized and relaxing. I really look forward to this class each school morning. I've never really been a busy reader, but now I have acquired an interest in good books. I wish this class were two semesters.

The student who wrote this evaluation may have been surprised to know that the course did not even exist in my mind at the end of the previous school year. Not until I attended the Trumbull County English Teachers Institute at Youngstown State University, Youngstown, Ohio in June of 1979 did I even conceive of the idea. The purpose of the Institute was to bring English teachers together in an effort to evaluate and improve instruction in the Trumbull County schools. It proved to be an invaluable experience for me.

I have always appreciated the value of independent study, having earned a few of my undergraduate credits this way, but for some reason I thought of it as a "college option" given to those students who were willing to work hard on their own, taking full responsibility for their assignments. After listening to some of my fellow English teachers tell of their success with independent reading, I began to consider seriously how such a course might work at our school.

McDonald High School is a small institution of about five hundred students in grades seven through twelve. The only junior-senior high school in town, it is the center of activity for students and their families. The largely ethnic population of approximately four thousand people is very traditional in its beliefs, and the school curriculum has always reflected

this conservativism. Course offerings have not changed much over the years, except for a shift from basic English to a series of English electives for juniors and seniors which took place about eight years ago. Add to this the fact that I had only taught at McDonald for two years and had the least seniority in the English department, and it is easy to see why I might have been reluctant to approach the administration with an idea for a new English course where students sit and read for forty-two minutes every school day.

Fortunately for me, the time was right. The school board had just hired a new principal from within the system with whom I had good rapport. I haunted him all summer long, spending a great deal of time convincing him of the value of such a course. As luck would have it, I did have an open class period that had to be filled, and the principal felt there was a good possibility that my new course might be adopted. I had prepared a rationale and a list of objectives, along with a reading list, with which he was impressed. In my rationale I explained how important it is for students to be exposed to many different types of books and authors. I used as part of my ammunition a quote from Richard Lanham's Style--An Anti-Textbook (New Haven, Conn.: Yale Univ. Press, 1974), p. 9, in which he states, "Americans used to read only current fiction. Now they read nothing at all. For written utterance, they have as context only journalism." In a basic English class, I reasoned, there is barely enough time to read one or possibly two novels a year, since so much other material must be covered. An independent reading course would be of tremendous value to those students who are avid

readers as well as those who enjoy reading but can never seem to find the time.

To my delight the board accepted my proposal--with one stipulation. There would be no money for materials. Undaunted, I undertook the task of getting down to specifics. What, exactly, would I require of my students? How would I evaluate their progress? What would I do about the student who tried to "fake" his way through the course? Finally, how would I amass a collection of books and materials with no money?

After talking to a few people who attended the Institute and who had taught similar courses, I decided to make the course available to juniors and seniors on an elective basis with no more than fifteen in a class. The principal was in agreement. Students have to read eight books in eighteen weeks (one semester) in order to pass the course. My book list includes the classics, contemporary fiction and non-fiction, and some of the more popular teenage novels, such as Robert Cormier's I Am the Cheese, Paul Zindel's The Pigman, and S. E. Hinton's The Outsiders. Each book is assigned a point value depending upon its length and difficulty. When I hand out the list I emphasize that students are not required to stick to it, but that it merely serves as a starting point for them in selecting their books. I try to have at least one copy of each title on hand. (How do I do this with no money? Read on.)

Once I was sure my course would be adopted I began collecting books. I phoned the school librarian (a personal friend who didn't mind having her summer vacation interrupted), and she became very excited over the prospect of such a course. She asked for a copy of my book list and assured me that she had extra copies of many of the titles, which she would loan me indefinitely. I began to make the rounds of bookstores that sell second-

hand paperbacks. Many of my "treasures" were found at these places for a fraction of their original cost. Since I am a habitual "browser" in book-stores, I kept my eyes open for titles I needed and was able to start the school year with a fair collection of books.

One of my staunchest supporters has been our high school guidance counselor who has done a wonderful job of "selling" my course to the students. She, too, has a copy of my book list, and every so often I find a paperback or two in my mailbox. I don't have to ask who put them there. Being a lover of books herself, she states:

> In an age when "reading" borders on being one of the lost arts, we are indeed fortunate to have independent reading included in our curriculum. The requirement, of reading a minimum number of classics, novels, non-fiction, et al, in a relatively short period of time, seems a most strenuous task to the student who is a novice at recreational reading. However, many students who have completed the course volunteer remarks that indicate they are grateful to have been "forced" into re-learning an appreciation of the written word. Their ability to discuss at length the content of the literature results in a new respect for the skill of verbal expression and for the opinions and critiques of their peers.
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> The class seems to have generated an almost exuberant dynamism to share their new-found love of reading. The students are enthusiastic and do a skillful job of "selling" the idea of reading as a leisure time activity.

I try to keep the class as informal and student-centered as possible, acting more as a counselor to the students. Moffett and Wagner encourage this technique in their book, Student Centered Language Arts and Reading, K-13, (Boston, Mass.: Houghton Mifflin, 1976), pp. 29-30. In discussing individualization, they state, "The beauty of all this is that the more self-directing you help them (the students) become, the freer you are to counsel and coach them to higher realms of language learning." To foster

this idea I have converted a corner of my classroom into a reading center of sorts where I keep all books, index cards, and charts related to the course.

As soon as the students select a book, they fill in the title, author, and date they begin reading it next to their names on a large chart I have posted in the reading corner. This makes it easy for the students and me to see who is reading what and has encouraged them to seek opinions and recommendations on books from one another. As they read, they keep a running list in their vocabulary notebooks of difficult words they encounter. Every four weeks I test them on any twenty of these words they wish to submit. If they submit more than twenty, I give them an extra credit point for each one they correctly spell and define. Students seem to feel that this is useful to them, and I have received comments such as, "I really think I have increased my vocabulary by writing down and looking up words I don't know or am not sure of. Before, when I was reading on my own, I would come across a strange word and just skip over it because I was too lazy to go to the dictionary."

In order to keep track of their reading, I have large index cards available in the reading corner on which the students keep a daily log of their progress. They fill out a card for each book they read, writing the title and author at the top as well as their own name. Then each day they jot down the date, how many pages they have read, and a one or two sentence summary. The students know that I check these cards carefully, making comments where appropriate, so they are diligent about allowing themselves a minute or two at the end of the period to do this task.

As the students complete their books, I assign either a worksheet or project related in some way to what they have read. For example, one

boy who read George Orwell's Animal Farm was very interested in the political implications of the book. He wondered which communist leaders were being satirized. I asked him to research the reign of Joseph Stalin and to write an essay in which he compared and/or contrasted any similarities or differences he saw between Stalin and his tactics and those of Napoleon in the novel. This idea of integrating reading/writing activities is reinforced by Stephen and Susan Judy in The English Teacher's Handbook, (Cambridge, Mass.: Winthrop Publishers, Inc., 1979), p. 19. In developing the reading, writing, speaking activities for a course, they say, it is important to ask, "In what ways can the reading selections stimulate writing in this course?" This handbook can be extremely helpful in planning a new course such as this, since it devotes an entire chapter to course design and another to individualizing. Some other types of reading/writing activities I assign are character analyses, biographical sketches of various authors, and comparison-contrast essays on two or more books by the same author. For variety, I sometimes give the students worksheets composed of questions about plot, characters, setting, etc., which I have made up myself. This forces them to go back to the book and look for specific details they may have missed in their reading. I have found that what the students enjoy most about this arrangement is the opportunity to do independent research and the idea that the assignment is tailor-made for them. They know they won't be hounded to turn it in, but they also know that another will be forthcoming with the next book, so they never let themselves fall too far behind. One girl commented, "I'm finally taking responsibility for myself and I like it. I think students are 'spoon fed' too much by their teachers, and they never become independent."

Just as reading/writing activities are important in course planning, so are those which involve speaking/listening. These four basic skills were strongly stressed at the Institute, and the teachers who attended explored various ways of integrating them in classroom activities. Part of my course design includes one-to-one conferences between the student and me upon the completion of each book. These discussions are of great value in helping me become better acquainted with the students. Personally, I have discovered their likes and dislikes, fears and insecurities, hopes and dreams. Many times all students need is someone to talk to, and book discussions often reveal this need. They read a book that is relevant to their lives, and they want to talk about it. In her book Literature As Exploration (New York: Nobe and Noble, 1976), pp. 30-31, Louse M. Rosenblatt says it well.

> What then happens in the reading of a literary work? Through the medium of words the text brings into the reader's consciousness certain concepts, certain sensuous experiences, certain images of things, people, actions, scenes. The special meanings and, more particularly, the submerged associations that these words and images have for the individual reader will largely determine what the work communicates to him. The reader brings to the work personality traits, memories of past events, present needs and preoccupations, a particular mood of the moment, and a particular physical condition. These and many other elements in a never-to-be-duplicated combination determine his response to the peculiar contribution of the text. For the adolescent reader, the experience of the work is further specialized by the fact that he has probably not yet arrived at a consistent view of life or achieved a fully integrated personality.

During these conferences, some of the more shy students may have to be "drawn out" a little, but once they see that I am sincerely interested in their reaction, they usually have little trouble communicating. I make it a point to tell them that this is not an oral quiz, but rather a sharing of thoughts about the book. There seems to be this mistaken

idea among students that English teachers have read every book there is, and they may feel a little uneasy about discussion. Many of them are surprised to find that this is not true and are delighted to recommend a book they particularly liked. I have quite a list of these "recommendations," which I tell them will be my "summer reading project."

Besides helping me to know the student better, conferencing also gives the student a chance to see me as a human being who is interested in what he has to say. Too often students view teachers as "ogres" or "know-it-alls" who couldn't care less about what a student thinks.

In addition to individual conferences, we also have group conferences every so often where the students can discuss books they have read with other members of the class. They ask questions of each other and many times arrive at a decision to try a certain book that they may not have considered before. We sit in an informal circle, and I serve as a "moderator" for the discussion. I have invited other members of the English faculty and the administration to sit in on these conferences, and those who have seemed to enjoy the experience.

After the students have completed their eight books, projects, and conferences, they are free to read with "no strings attached." I still require that they list their choices on the reading chart for consultation purposes, and that they continue to keep a vocabulary list. However, further projects and conferences are unnecessary unless the students wish to continue for some reason. At the end of the semester I give a comprehensive vocabulary test and an essay exam from which they may choose their questions based upon the books they have read.

After a year of teaching this course, I can truly say that I am satisfied with its progress. Student evaluations have been very encouraging, with the only criticism being, "Let's get more books." In answer to this request, I am presently writing a grant to secure more money for books and materials. One of the things of which I am most proud is my students. Arriving a few minutes late to class one day, I found them sitting on the floor outside my locked classroom reading their books. They could have been talking or wandering around, but they were reading. I was touched in a way that's hard to explain.

I have been very fortunate in another way. The board of education recently decided, on the recommendation of the administration, to go back to offering four years of basic English at the high school level, eliminating almost all the electives. Independent reading was one of only two English courses that survived the alteration. In pleading my case to the principal, I was once again supported by the guidance counselor, who felt that dropping this course would be a great loss to the students in many ways. Apparently he was convinced of the need for such a course at our school.

In retrospect, my initial fear of planning and designing this new course seems unfounded. It doesn't necessarily take a teacher with twenty years of experience to see and understand the needs of students. My attendance at the Institute at Youngstown State University helped me to realize that even a teacher who is the newest member of her department can bring those needs to the attention of the right people and attempt to satisfy them.

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